NCA
VOC FOR IOP/FN
BACKGROUNDER NO. 5-5672 MARCH 30, 1978
DOUGLAS ROBERTS/BEIRUT

LEBANON'S LATEST REFUGEES

ANNCR:

THE ISRAELI OFFENSIVE AGAINST PALESTINIAN GUERRILLAS IN SOUTHERN LEBANON PROVOKED YET ANOTHER MASS EXODUS OF CIVILIANS FROM A REGION ALREADY DEVASTATED BY MONTHS OF FACTIONAL WARFARE AND YEARS OF INSTABILITY. DOUGLAS ROBERTS HAS THIS BACKGROUND REPORT FROM BEIRUT.

VOICE:

IT IS NOT YET KNOWN JUST HOW MANY PEOPLE IN SOUTH LEBANON FLED NORTHWARDS AS ISRAELI FORCES BATTLED PALESTINIAN GUERRILLAS THERE EARLIER THIS MONTH. BUT GOVERNMENT SOURCES HERE ESTIMATED THAT AT LEAST ONE HUNDRED THOUSAND CIVILIANS, MOST OF THEM POOR FARMERS, FLED THE AREA DURING THE FIGHTING. NOW, THEY ARE LODGED IN THE TENS OF REFUGEE CAMPS OR IN EMPTY HOUSES AND APARTMENT BUILDINGS HERE IN BEIRUT AND IN THE CITY OF SIDON, JUST NORTH OF THE BATTLE ZONE.

SOME REFUGEES ESCAPED WITH AT LEAST PART OF THEIR BELONGINGS; BUT FOR MANY, ALL WAS LOST IN THE ARTILLERY BATTLE, BOMBING RAIDS AND HOUSE-TO-HOUSE FIGHTING THAT DEVASTATED SO MANY OF THE SMALL VILLAGES IN THE HILLY COUNTRYSIDE NEAR THE ISRAELI BORDER. ONE SUCH VILLAGE WAS ABBASIYEH, A FEW KILOMETERS NORTHEAST OF THE PALESTINIAN STRONGHOLD OF TYRE, AND NOW IN ISRAELI HANDS. IT CAME UNDER HEAVY ISRAELI ARTILLERY AND AIR ATTACKS MARCH EIGHTEENTH. SOME OF THE VILLAGERS ESCAPED, BUT MOST WERE KILLED.

ONE OF THOSE WHO DID ESCAPE WAS MAHMOUD SAID, AN AGING BEARDED FARMER DRESSED IN A BAGGY BROWN SUIT AND WOOLEN CAP. HE TOLD VISITORS ABOUT THE ATTACK AS HE SAT OUTSIDE A TENT IN A BEIRUT REFUGEE CAMP, SMOKING THE MILD SWEET TOBACCO OF

SOUTHERN LEBANON OUT OF A WATERPIPE. (OPT) WITH OTHER REFUGEES FROM ABBASIYEH NODDING IN AGREEMENT MISTER SAID SAID THREE QUARTERS OF THE VILLAGERS HAD BEEN KILLED DURING THE ISRAELI AIR STRIKES, INCLUDING MANY WHO HAD TAKEN REFUGE IN A MOSQUE. THE BOMBING OF THE MOSQUE SEEMED TO SHOCK THE DEVOUT MOSLEM VILLAGERS MORE THAN ANYTHING ELSE. MISTER SAID'S MOTHER AND OTHER RELATIVES WERE AMONG THE VICTIMS. (END OPT) THE OLD MAN AND A HANDFUL OF SURVIVORS LEFT THE DAY AFTER THE ATTACK WALKING FOR MORE THAN FOUR HOURS UNTIL THEY REACHED THE MAIN COASTAL HIGHWAY AND WERE ABLE TO FIND TRANSPORT TO THE REFUGEE CAMP NEAR BEIRUT AIRPORT. THERE ARE JUST OVER A HUNDRED TENTS IN THE CAMP HOUSING NEARLY ONE THOUSAND REFUGEES. TWENTY-SIX-YEAR-OLD HASSAN SOUBRA, A SMART-LOOKING LEBANESE ARMY LIEUTENANT, IS IN CHARGE. HE SEES TO IT THAT THE REFUGEES ARE GIVEN CLOTHING, MEDICAL CARE AND THREE MEALS A DAY, INCLUDING EGGS, MEATS, RICE, CHEESE, POTATOES AND OLIVES.

THERE ARE THREE SUCH CAMPS IN BEIRUT AND FOUR MORE IN SIDON TO THE SOUTH. A SPECIAL INTER-MINISTERIAL COMMITTEE WAS SET UP TO OVERSEE OPERATIONS AT THE CAMPS AND MAKE SURE THAT THE REFUGEES ARE CARED FOR. EMERGENCY RELIEF SUPPLIES ARE COMING IN FROM WEST GERMANY, BRITAIN, IRAN, OIL-RICH STATES OF THE ARABIAN PENINSULA AND VARIOUS UNITED NATIONS AGENCIES. THE UNITED STATES IS SENDING IN TENTS, SHEETS AND BLANKETS, COOKING UTENSILS AND MEDICAL SUPPLIES.

IT'S AN AWESOME TASK, AND THERE ARE CLEARLY MANY PROBLEMS, BUT LIEUTENANT SOUBRA SAID THAT IN HIS CAMP, AT LEAST, THINGS ARE GOING WELL, AND THE REFUGEES THEMSELVES SEEMED SATISFIED. ONE GOVERNMENT OFFICIAL HERE SAID THE BIGGEST CASUALTY OF THE ISRAELI INVASION WAS LEBANON ITSELF. IT HAS AGGRAVATED THE ECONOMI AND SOCIAL PROBLEMS, HE SAID, IN A COUNTRY THAT IS STILL TRYING TO

RECOVER FROM A DEVASTATING CIVIL WAR. THE OFFICIAL SAID THAT ALL THE REFUGEE PROGRAMS ARE BASED ON THE HOPE THAT THE SOUTHERNERS WILL EVENTUALLY BE ABLE TO RETURN TO THEIR HOME. THIS WAS CONFIRMED BY INTERIOR MINISTER SALAH SALMAN IN AN INTERVIEW WITH THE BEIRUT MAGAZINE MONDAY MORNING." BUT MISTER SALMAN SAID NO RETURN PLAN WILL BE SET IN MOTION UNTIL IT IS CERTAIN THAT THE FIGHTING IS OVER. SO FAR, HE SAID, WE ARE NOT READY TO ADVISE THE REFUGEES TO GO BACK TO THEIR HOMES.

MOST OF THE REFUGEES THEMSELVES CLEARLY WANT TO GO BACK. BUT THEY TOO ARE HESITANT AND UNSURE OF THE FUTURE. MAHMOUD SAID SAID HE IS AFRAID TO LEAVE THE CAMP FOR FEAR HE WILL LOSE HIS PLACE TO ANOTHER REFUGEE. BUT HE LEFT NO DOUBT THAT ONE DAY HE WILL GO BACK TO ABBASIYEH. HE SAT OUTSIDE HIS TENT SIFTING A HANDFULL OF DIRT THROUGH HIS FINGERS AND SAID THAT EVEN IF HE WERE OFFERED AN OCEAN OF GOLD, HE WOULD STILL WANT TO RETURN TO HIS SMALL PIECE OF LAND IN SOUTHERN LEBANON.

JS/PY